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The Kremlin's Age of Andropov

In a remarkably swift changing of the guard, the Politburo names former KGB spymaster Yuri Andropov as the Soviet Union's new boss of bosses.

Bundled up like a ponderous old bear, Leonid Brezhnev labored up the steps of the Lenin Mausoleum early last week. He hardly acknowledged the doting Konstantin Chernenko, the detached Yuri Andropov or any of the other comrades in his aging Politburo. Brezhnev braved the biting cold for two hours, waving and saluting wanly as the military gear assembled for the Bolshevik revolution's 65th anniversary parade passed in review. Now and then his jaw dropped. An aide removed his sunglasses for him. Finally, he shuffled off behind the mausoleum, disappearing from public view. Three days later, somewhere in the depths of Moscow or in his *dacha* outside town, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, 75, died when his game but worn-out heart stopped.

For 18 years, longer than any leader save Stalin, Brezhnev presided over the Soviet Union. He drove the country relentlessly to match the military supremacy of the United States; he crushed dissent at home and snuffed out free spirits in Czechoslovakia and Poland (page 48). At first the Kremlin kept the death secret. But rumors began cascading through Moscow when a Police Day television concert abruptly gave way to a movie about Lenin and a solemn Beethoven piano recital pre-empted a hockey game. Then the U.S. Embassy flashed word to Washington that Soviet television technicians had been spotted wearing black armbands.

Finally, 26½ hours after Brezhnev died, an announcer in black came on the air to report the passing of the "true continuer of Lenin's cause." A day later, the Politburo met and with unprecedented efficiency bequeathed the leadership of the Communist Party to Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov, 68, a former KGB chief who had been deftly maneuvering his way upward for years. In Moscow's streets, calm citizens offered Brezhnev a fitting epitaph. "When Stalin died, we all cried," said one woman. "But we don't cry anymore. It's not that kind of era."

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Cool Pragmatist: From what little was known of Andropov, the Kremlin's new leader seemed prepared to match his U.S. adversary step for step. His credentials suggested he might carry less ideological baggage than his predecessors. Brezhnev, who was eight years older, held romantic memories of the 1917 revolution and the way it improved the lives of his father, a factory worker, and his family. Andropov, born on June 15, 1914, was too young to remember. Early in his career, Brezhnev took part in the Stalinist campaigns that forged the modern Soviet economy: the forced collectivization of agriculture and the first Five Year Plan. Andropov missed both events: he graduated from the Rybinsk Water Transportation Technicum in 1936. Given that background, Andropov might prove to be a less emotional leader than Brezhnev and Nikita Khrushchev, ruling with a more pragmatic style.

The new party chief first rose to prominence as the Soviet ambassador to Hungary from 1954 to 1957. As such, he has been associated with Khrushchev's brutal repression in 1956. But whether Andropov was plotting strategy or only following orders was impossible to say. At least as revealing was Andropov's association with Hungary from 1957 to 1967—when he headed the Central Committee's department in charge of relations with other communist countries—and later, when he ranked as the Politburo's expert on Hungarian affairs. During that period Andropov at least tolerated "goulash communism," Hungary's program of liberal economic decentralization.

Sophisticated: In 1967 he was promoted to chairman of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti (KGB). Under his stewardship, the state-security apparatus grew more subtle and sophisticated. Its techniques included committing dissidents to prisons and mental hospitals, permitting some undesirables to emigrate—and expelling those like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who wanted to stay. But Andropov's methods were also persistent, and there was no reason to think that he would ever allow political diversity to flourish. "It's a sick joke if the West thinks Yuri Andropov is a liberal," said Alexander Ginzburg, one of five dissidents exchanged with the United States for two Soviet spies in 1979.

Andropov's 15-year stint at the head of the KGB's worldwide intelligence network presumably left him better informed about foreign affairs than any of his predecessors at the beginning of their rules. But there were few hints of his views on policy. In the 1960s he promoted Georgi Arbatov as his chief adviser. Arbatov, in a later role as head of the U.S.A. and Canada Institute, became one of the intellectual architects of détente. Andropov's own speeches expressed relatively enthusiastic praise for détente—even in 1979 and 1980, when other Soviet leaders had turned to vigorously denouncing the United States.

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He could not have climbed to the top without considerable ambition and wile. He lived in the same Moscow apartment building as Leonid Brezhnev on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, but he always got a faster start on his days. Even during Brezhnev's healthier times, the party boss could be seen riding to work in the front seat of his limousine at 10 in the morning or later. Andropov, in the back seat of his own car, sleeves rolled up, eyes on a stack of official papers, had already zoomed by along the same route at 8 a.m. or earlier. At work, Andropov has been a stern taskmaster. "He is known as a very tough man to work for, like your Henry Kissinger," said a Soviet source in Western Europe. "He drives his staff to exhaustion."

STEVEN STRASSER with JOYCE BARNATHAN in Moscow, ROBERT B. CULLEN in New York, ANDREW NAGORSKI in Rome, SCOTT SULLIVAN in Paris and bureau reports